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ABSTRACT

Teaching grammar for its own sake is largely counterproductive when the goal of instruction is to have students communicate spontaneously, fluently, and accurately in the target language. The ideal foreign language program is one providing the best possible environment for language acquisition to take place. Explicit teaching about the language should be tailored to the students' level. Sensitivity to grammar is generally limited at the beginning of language study, but increases with overall language proficiency. An overriding principle on which to base instructional decisions is that the teacher's responsibility is to provide for his students only the parts of the total picture that they cannot provide for themselves. These include feedback, correction, encouragement, motivation, supporting examples, realia, cultural interaction and information, situations in which the language is used, the language (as distinct from its forms alone), opportunities for real information exchange, authentic communication/ conversation strategies, alternative and supplementary pronunciations, vocabulary, and structure, and authentic language as used by a native speaker, and, above all, a warm, supportive, human contact with the language. Classroom grammar study should be used for clarifying points of grammar, when grammar is defined as the system through which meanings are converted into speech. (MSE)

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ACTFL MASTER LECTURE SERIES

The Teaching of Grammar: The Relationship of Structure to Communication

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September 1983

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FOREWARD

For the past several years, prominent members of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) have been presenting lectures to the faculty and staff of the Defense Language Institute, Foreign Language Center. The purpose of these lectures has been to discuss recent trends and developments in foreign language learning and teaching as well as to strengthen professional contacts between DLIFLC and ACTFL.

The ACTFL Master Lecture, "The Teaching of Grammar: The Relationship of Structure to Communication," by Dr. Theodore J. Higgs, was presented at the DLIFLC in September 1983. This paper is published to make the content of the lecture fully accessible to the DLIFLC professionals.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent an official position of the DLIFLC nor of any other element of the United States Department of Defense.

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"The Teaching of Grammar:
the relationship of structure to communication"

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The purpose of this discussion is to make one major point, and then to suggest some ways that we can carry out our mission as foreign language instructors as we keep this major point always in mind. The point is as follows:

> Teaching grammar for its own sake is largely counter-productive, when the goal of instruction in a program is to have students communicate spontaneously in the target language.

In order to understand this point and its importance to us in our teaching, we should first arrive at a definition of just what "grammar" is. For further understanding, we can then look at some of the skill level descriptions used in evaluating oral proficiency interviews. Finally, we will see some concrete examples of this point as applied to life here at the DLIFLC.

The traditional way of understanding the word "grammar" is in terms of our ability to explain, using technical vocabulary, exactly how sentences in a given language are intended to be put together. This technical vocabulary includes terms such as "direct object, subject, dependent clause subjunctive mood, ablative case," etc. Now, I do not want to say even for one second that there are no circumstances under which is this kind of terminology--this use of the word "grammar"-- is useful. But I would like to ask all of you to accept, at least for this afternoon, a less concrete and perhaps a less superficial definition of "grammar", and ask you to think of a "grammar" simply as a system for converting meaning into speech. If you think of a grammar in these terms, that is, as something that turns meanings that are inside my head into speech, so that others can share those meanings with me, then you will see that even a young child, perhaps only 6 or 7 years old indeed possesses a very good—even a very sophisticated grammar. Yet this same child almost beyond doubt can tell you absolutely nothing about how his language works. He will know nothing about cases, agreements, clause types, phonetic reality, or any of the other things that we grammarians think we know so much about. It is ultimately the child's type of grammar that is most beneficial in achieving our major goal of instruction: that of using the language spontaneously and accurately as a vehicle of communication.

As we all know, in our lowest level foreign-language classes our true beginners are literally at the zero level: they have no functional ability in the language. In our terms "no functional ability," means that our students have no way of converting their own meanings into speech, following the norms of the foreign language. Before very much can happen, they must pass into the 0+ range. Within this range, they have "no real autonomy of expression;" they operate almost exclusively through the use of

"memorized utterances or formulas." Naturally enough, then, they are using words, or short sentences which they treat as words, as their first level of communication. For 0+ students, "Comment ca va" is a vocabulary item just like "la plume" or "le lait." The linguistic material that holds the language together--inflections, agreements, tense markings, etc.--are completely missing in the sense that the students possess neither awareness nor knowledge of them, and certainly they exercise no control over them. Whatever they have memorized, they can say. Even if they have memorized some words or phrases flawlessly, they can not manipulate them or recombine them. In terms of a teaching methodology, then, they need instruction that primarily expands their vocabulary. At the same time, however, they need to be presented with data that illustrate the language's other communicative devices, because a great deal of meaning is communicated by things like intonation, word order, tense, mood, or case. In short, even at this early stage, they need to hear the language being used correctly, so that even unconsciously they gradually become sensitive to more and more of the new system for converting meanings into speech. At this stage of development, you--the instructor--are the only available source of correct target language data that are being used in an authentic way. Put another way, only you can show your students some of the new ways that familiar, or at least knowable meanings are converted into speech.

As students proceed through Level 1 and 1+ , we expect them to be able to say a great many things, even though they say them very simply. More importantly, at level 1 we expect "almost every utterance (to contain) fractured syntax and other grammatical errors." At Level 1+ , grammatical accuracy is "evident although not consistent." This is just another way of recognizing that at this stage of development, linguistic accuracy is still relatively less important than vocabulary in achieving a rating of Level 1 or 1+ in speaking. We can illustrate the relationship between how much linguistic accuracy is needed to be rated a 1 or 1+, compared to how much vocabulary or pronunciation is needed. (TRANSPARENCY) These relationships will change for every proficiency level all the way up through level 5. The important thing to remember here is that it at Level 1 or 1+, vocabulary and pronunciation are the most important factors, and if our students are trying to achieve these ratings, then our method of classroom instruction must place relatively more emphasis on vocabulary and pronunciation.

As we examine Levels 2 and 2+, we find linguistic accuracy starts to be much more important in the rating system. (TRANSPARENCY) Notice, for example, how much higher the line for linguistic accuracy is at Level 2 than it was for Level 1. A Level 2 speaker "can usually handle elementary constructions quite accurately, but does not have thorough or confident control of the grammar." In terms of our definition of "grammar," this means that the student is still using his own tentative grammar perhaps more than he is using the true grammar of the foreign language. At the 2+ level, linguistic accuracy is coming together in interesting ways, but there are still noticeable patterns of error, both in relatively simple structures and especially in the more complex structures. What this tells us is that in our classes we must place increasing emphasis on the importance of "doing it right." In fact, we should always insist on the importance of doing it right--even from the very beginning of instruction. For it is certainly unfair to our students if we tell them at the beginning that it does not matter if they do it right, and then later on tell them that they cannot

succeed unless they do it right. This would be the same as "changing the rules in the middle of the game."

The secret to unlocking this dilemma lies in knowing exactly what we are requiring that our student do right. At the lowest levels, they must pronounce the language intelligibly—at least so that we can understand them. They must also use correctly the vocabulary we have told them to memorize. As other linguistic elements beyond pronunciation and vocabulary increasingly contribute to the message our students want or need to communicate, we must also insist that they do them right. Students need to know, and to understand why it is not sufficient merely to make themselves understood, assuming that they are taking part in a program that will train them to be successful communicators. One reason is that successful communication at Level 2 and beyond by all means requires doing it right, because increasing amounts of information are communicated non-lexically. That is, how words are connected begins to count almost as much as which words are connected.

This leads us directly to a consideration of Level 3: the highest level that we might reasonably expect to teach to. It is at Level 3 that linguistic accuracy becomes critically important. The Level 3/3+ speaker will surely not be confused with a native. But at the same time, he will not show any consistent patterns of error in the linguistic structures of the target language. (TRANSPARENCY)

So far, we have been looking mainly at linguistic accuracy as a variable which assumes more and more importance in proficiency ratings as our students move from the lowest proficiency levels into the ranges in which we can expect them to function professionally in a foreign language. As foreign-language instructors, we must understand that our students' progress through these levels of proficiency is made in rather short steps, and that their overall language ability develops at different rates of speed in the different areas of language use. It is also very important to remember that our students need different kinds of instruction—different methods—depending on where they are in their overall development. The best teaching methodology is a methodology that recognizes what a student's immediate needs are, weighs those needs in the context of the long-range goals of the program, and responds to them as directly and helpfully as possible. This means that at the lower levels we must stress pronunciation and vocabulary more than we stress morphology and syntax. But is also means that we stress local linguistic accuracy from the very first day of class. We always stress the need for accuracy in whatever we are directly teaching our students, or encouraging them to do. For, as they approach Level 3, linguistic accuracy is the single most important factor in acheiving that rating.

It is now important for us to understand clearly the two different uses of the word "grammar" that we have been talking about, and the different implications that these meanings have for foreign-language teachers. For centuries, the only meaning of the word "grammar" in foreign-language teaching was associated with being able to explain precisely in any language the rules that apparently account for how some language works. This meaning of the word "grammar" is part of the label for the most common methodology for teaching foreign languages from at least the Middle Ages until well into

the twentieth century. This was the so-called "Grammar/Translation Method." This method never had as its ultimate goal the spontaneous and correct use of the foreign language for routine, oral communication. It was really a methodology for teaching reading skills, not speaking or listening. Its very name tells us what its goals were: grammar (in the traditional sense) and translation. As a matter of fact, students who learned under this method often had extensive knowledge of the grammatical rules of a language, and could, given sufficient time and resources, translate from one language into another. However, most people who studied under this method were never able to use the language in their every day lives, with real people from another culture, and the method has largely been abandoned.

World War II brought the diffusion of a new methodology that ignored completely the traditional understanding of what "grammar" is. This methodology is usually called "the audiolingual method." Although it was devised by linguists and language professors in academia, much of it was first implemented on a large scale right here in Monterey. People who developed and advocated the audiolingual method stated clearly their belief that the use of a language is strictly a matter of having the right set of habits. Learning a new language was seen only as a matter of learning a new set of habits. Meaning had absolutely nothing to do with the task. In fact, leading linguistic analysts of the time said over and over that a language could be analyzed and learned without having to know anything at all about what was meant! Once again, we found that people who studied under this method often achieved astonishingly good pronunciation, but few people ever got very far beyond Level 0+ or Level 1, because they rarely used more than memorized utterances. This methodology promised habits, and its students developed habits, but they were unable to use the language spontaneously and accurately to express their own meanings.

I mention these two methods for a very good reason. They define two extreme positions out of the many in-between positions that foreign-language instructors might have. The first, the Grammar/Translation Method, argued that knowing the traditional rules of the grammar consciously would lead to spontaneous and correct use of the language. The other, the audiolingual method, argued that concious knowledge of the traditional rules of grammar was entirely irrelevant. That the students needed was to acquire a new set of habits. The idea was that all those good responses would disappear because they had not been reinforced, or had been reinforced negatively. Experience has shown us that neither approach worked.

And so, every "new" methodology that has been proposed since the audio-lingual method was abandoned has tried to work out a compromise between these two conflicting methods that we have just looked at. During this period, one of the most brilliant and exciting figures in the field of foreign language teaching has been Stephen D. Krashen, a professor of linguistics at the University of Southern California. One way of teaching that he wrote very favorably about for several years is called the Monitor Model. Krashen's original hypothesis was that only language acquisition could account for people's ability to use a foreign language spontaneously and correctly for communication. He also thought that learning traditional grammatical rules would in some interesting way make it easier for people to acquire the foreign language. The reason that he called his approach The Monitor Model was that he believed that students

could check, or monitor, the language they had acquired unconsciously, whether in the foreign-language classroom or elsewhere, against the rules for the language that they had learned consciously. According to the Monitor Model, the student's acquired language ability would spontaneously initiate an utterance, and then his learned language ability, that is, his conscious knowledge of the correct linguistic rule would lead him to produce a correct utterance in the foreign language.

However, after several years of some very good and extensive research, Professor Krashen made a number or important discoveries. First, he discovered that for the most part, nobody--not even professional linguists--even knew what kinds of rules would account for the way human languages actually worked. Then he discovered that even when we seemed to know just what the right rule was in accounting for some correct form or structure in the language, there was no reason to believe that our students could actually learn and apply such a rule correctly. Finally, Krashen says that the ability to produce the target language correctly and appropriately emerges naturally; it cannot be taught.

We do not have time here to investigate thoroughly all of the implications of the Input Hypothesis. But we can make a few brief observations based on other things we have been talking about. Perhaps first we should notice that, other things being equal, the success of the Input Hypothesis depends entirely on the operation of a Language Acquisition Device--something that Krashen says everybody has, but which he does not further define orcharacterize. Second, he asserts that the process by which a language is acquired is the same for adults confronted with a second or a foreign language as it is for children who are acquiring their first language. There is no hard evidence to support this claim. However, there is an enormous amount of evidence to suggest that at the very least the psychological environment in which adults encounter a foreign language is incomparably different from that of a child who is acquiring his native language. Surely the most important aspect of this psychological environment is that adults by definition already possess a fully developed linguistic system through which they have been communicating successfully since very early childhood. Needless to say, adults have also undergone a great deal of cognitive development that children quite simply have not. Perhaps most importantly, the Input Hypothesis provides no account of any student's failure to achieve native or near-native linguistic competence, except to say that they that they must need more input. For these and other reasons, then, it seems to me that we must be extremely cautious in accepting intact the Krashen model that he has called the Input Hypothesis. We should look at it critically, and identify for ourselves just what the Input Hypothesis offers by way of valuable insights into the language/learning/teaching process, and what parts of it must be taken as largely, and perhaps necessarily speculative.

I would now like to offer a possible solution for the problem of "the teaching of grammar" in a foreign language classroom in which our students are adults. Let us begin by once again stating the long-range goal which we must always have in our minds. The major goal of a foreign-language program should be constantly to provide students with opportunities to use the foreign language spontaneously, fluently, and accurately as a means of communicating with other people, and receiving other people's communication.

This goal corresponds very closely with the goals that Krashen states for his his Input Hypothesis. That is, it is a goal which in Krashen's terminology implies a great deal of language acquisition as distinct from language learning. Thus, it is reasonable for us to say that the ideal foreign-language program will be one that provides the best possible environment for language acquisition to take place.

Our experience shows us that adults under certain conditions can in fact acquire a considerable amount of a foreign language. These are the people that are referred to in the literature of foreign-language acquisition as "street learners." They might be servicemen, diplomats, or businmen who have served overseas, or the dependents of these people. We must accept on principle, then, that a certain amount of language acquisition of a sort that is superficially similar to child language acquisition is indeed possible. However, we must also make clear that "street learners" rarely achieve a proficiency level higher than 2+, in spite of spending perhaps years in close contact with the foreign language and culture. What this means is that such people often do possess the ability to get a message across, but that they typically do it at relatively low levels of sophistication, and with obvious patterns of grammatical errors. Furthermore, they give evidence of being unable to continue their linguistic development, even when they undertake the study of their foreign language in a formal, classroom environment, and even when it is extremely important in their careers to improve their control over the structures of the foreign language. In short, these acquisition that leads to what Higgs and Clifford have called "The Terminal Two."

What we can learn from this is that if in the foreign language classroom we provide a learning environment that duplicates the conditions under which "street learners" inperfectly acquire certain parts of the foreign language, then we run the risk of creating Terminal Twos at the end of the instructional process. What are some of the characteristics of such an environment? Virtually all of the emphasis is on the communication of a message at whatever cost, and virtually no emphasis would be placed on "doing it right." When the learner receives only positive feedback in terms of successfully communicating his message, perhaps in spite of the language rather than because of it, he decides that he must be doing it right, or at least well enough to survive, and his brain in effect says, "O.K. You have learned this language well enough to suit your needs. I will no longer pay attention to anything except new vocabulary."

Moving now to the opposite extreme, that of placing excessive emphasis on learning formal grammatical rules, we know and can easily demonstrate that there is no necessary relationship between what a person knows about a language in spontaneously and accurately in order to communicate meaning. I would like to offer a concrete recommendation for you that might help you to decide in your lesson planning or spontaneously during a class when it is a good idea to point out explicitly to your students some aspect of the "grammar" of the language that you are teaching. The principle is as follows:

"Limit your explicit teaching of the grammar to just those elements of form that most directly affect the meaning to be communicated."

This principle is applicable throughout the process of language learning. What is most important is to tailor your explicit teaching about the language to the level of your students. At the earliest stages, as we have already pointed out, the most direct relationship between language forms and the meanings that they communicate is in the area of vocabulary. However, as your students gradually begin to speak the language accurately, they will become increasingly sensitive to other aspects of the grammar, and hence able to notice and assimilate less overt signals of meaning.

Since the primary motivation that students have in learning a foreign language is to communicate through that language, they will not at the beginning of their study be highly motivated to "do it right." They will, however, be motivated to receive or transmit a message in the foreign language. If in the classroom approval and rewards are given only for "doing it right," students will soon conclude that their instructor is not insterested in whether or not they can communicate through the language, but only in whether or not they can do it right. This leads to a rapid breakdown in the student' motivation. For this reason, it is important to know when and how to correct students' errors. If the primary focus is on meaning and on how meaning is communicated through the language, it will be clear to the student that "doing it right" ultimately contributes a great deal to the success with which he communicates. This is a very delicate matter, and only great sensitivity on the part of the communication and correctness. It may be possible to give your students one or two examples, perhaps from their native language as well as from the target language, of how the grammar itselt aids in communicating a message. Native speakers of English can easily see the difference in meaning between saying "If you and I are friends, then we can discuss this openly." It helps them to understand that vocabulary alone does not communicate all the meaning; the grammar must also be in place in order for the desired meaning to get across. For languages that have rules governing the agreement of adjectives and the nouns they modify, the following example might be helpful. (TRANSPARENCY) Notice that Spanish students even at a very elementary level can understand this illustration. It is not necessary, nor is it even helpful to say over and over again that "Spanish" adjectives must agree with the nouns they modify for both gender and number."

There seems to be little justification at any point in the langauge-learning process for requiring that your students learn formal grammatical terminology. However, some of your students will find it psychologically comforting to "study the grammar." This is not because knowing formal rules directly contributes to their ability to use the language accurately, but because for some of your students "knowing the rules" will lower their anxiety, and in that way help to keep them open to additional imput and practice. One other consideration of formal grammar also deserves mention. That is, one of the marks of an educated user of a language is that he possesses some elementary knowledge of how his language works, even though that so-called "knowledge" is often quite false. May educated people can tell you what the subject or the direct object of a sentence is when given a sample sentence. But the same people will provide you with positively laughable definitions of these grammatical relationships it you ask for them. In any event, at the highest levels of instruction, there is some justification for teaching some grammatical terminology, but not as part

of the student' language-learning experience; only as part of their general education. What is important for us to realize is that such teaching of formal rules must not constitute the core, the main focus, of our instruction must be on illustrating for our students the relationship between the forms of the language and the meanings that those forms communicate.

I understand that a majority of the instructors here at the DLI are native speakers of the language that they teach. Being a native speaker of the language presents advantages and also disadvantages. The main advantage is that a native speaker can easily invent any number of examples of the language that illustrate a single structural point. Non-native speakers of the language they are teaching, unless they are exceptionally proficient, almost always feel relatively less comfortable inventing examples on the spot, and therefore when a student asks them a question they feel more secure in providing for him some other kind of explanation. We have every reason to believe that students' needs are better served by seeing and hearing several additional examples of the language, and by having meanings illustrated for them, than by having a grammar rule repeated to them. In being able to invent copious examples then, natives have an advantage over most non-natives. However, the disadvantage that native-speaking instructors face is that they have never confronted the language from the point of view of a learner. They have few valid intuitions about what are learning problems for non-speakers, and about where to find solutions for problems for non-speakers, and about where to find solutions for these problems. In fact, native speakers are typically quite unaware of how their own language actually signals meanings. Furthermore, for many native speakers, the only experience they have ever had of watching that language being taught is from their own native-language classes in their home country. It is important to realize that when in the United States, for example, a youngster of 12 or 14 years of age who studies "English" in school is not learning the language. He is learning a particular way of using that language to some purpose. In terms of proficiency testing, students who study their native language in school are really being exposed to skills associated with Levels 4 and 5: they are being taught how to tailor their language to an audience, and how to select the appropriate register of their language according to the situation. How different this is from our students who have great difficulty communicating even the simplest ideas!

I would like to close by giving you one overriding principle on which an instructor can base his teaching decisions. This principle states that the instructor's primary responsibility to his students is to provide for them just those parts of the total picture that they cannot provide for themselves. Depending on the type of textbook or other teaching materials being used, this principle alone might answer your major question about whether to teach formal grammar, and if so, how much. Because, if the teaching materials themselves provide extensive grammatical explanations, then spending time even in the "grammar hour" providing grammatical explanations contradicts this fundamental principle. It is entirely reasonable for us to demand that our students come to class with the vocabulary and the grammatical forms memorized. A metaphor that I am fond of using says that our students' job is to come to class with bricks, boards, tools, etc. The instructors' job, then, is to show the students how to build a house.

What, then, might we reasonably do during this "grammar hour" if we are not to re-present or re-explain the grammar that is already found in the students' textbook? I wholeheartedly recommend that you use the "grammar hour" for clarifying points of grammar, but only on the condition that the grammar points you clarify are compatible with the definition of grammar that we agreed to adopt at the beginning of this presentation. That is, that the grammar is the system through which meanings are converted into speech. Let me give your one or two concrete examples.

Let's assume that you are teaching a language that has direct-object pronouns. You should assume that your students will arrive at the "grammar hour" having memorized the forms of the direct-object pronouns. Thus, nothing is served by "reviewing" the forms themselves. The focus will be on the way that these forms serve to communicate meaning, and on just what kind of meaning they communicate. In this case, the problem is to show your students the difference in meaning between using a fully specified direct object word, phrase, or sentence, and using an appropriate direct-object pronoun.

My assumption is that a language that has direct-object pronouns uses them to signal that the direct object is to be treated in some communicative context as shared information, as distinct from new information. If the direct object is being introduced into a context, that is, if it is new information, then it will be fully specified. Thereafter, it is treated as shared information, and as such it is referred to by a pronoun rather than by repeating the fully specified form throughout the conversation. What our students need to know then, in terms of the grammar converting meaning into speech, is What meaning is transmitted when I treat old, or shared information as though it were new information? I would guess that what should have been very casual, non-emphatic references to the original direct object would now be understood by the native speaker as very important, that is, emphasized references; references that directly imply that a contrast or a comparison is going to be made. When the remainder of the conversation fails to provide such a contrast or comparison, that is, when the native's communicative expectations are not fulfilled, the native speaker concludes either that he has not made himself understood, or that he has failed to understand the other person. His desire to continue the conversation is adversely affected. This kind of knowledge, whether concious or not, of the relationship that exists between form and meaning is what we should all mean when we use the expression "communicative competence."

I would guess that all natural languages have structural, i.e. grammatical ways to signal whether or not any given element is to be understood as new information or shared information. Spanish, for example, simply eliminates grammatical subjects when they are shared information. Other nouns that are shared information are eliminated, and only the articles and adjectives remain. Direct objects that are shared information become pronouns. Prepositional phrases that are shared information become simple adverbs of time, place, manner, etcetera. It is not only possible but also extremely desirable in a Spanish course to structure a major portion of--let's call it enlightened grammar teaching--around the grammatical consequences of whether or not a particular sentence constituent is old or new information.

Moving into another area, a very fertile undertaking for the "grammer hour" is to clear up the domain of certain vocabulary items. The English verb "drive," to take just one example has many different senses. Driving a car around a neighborhood is not the same as driving around the neighborhood; driving a nail is different from driving a golf ball. The foreign language almost certainly will use a different verb for each sense of English "drive." The potential for miscommunication in overgeneralizing the semantic domain of a known lexical item is enormous.

Finally, one other activity that could be made to work successfully during the "grammar hour" involves working from sentences that are presented in a context, and asking students first to tell you what a sentence means, and then asking them to indicate the parts of the sentence that convey that information. These questions about what and how a sentence means are not to be construed as translation exercises. They are opportunities to show how a language indicates what is happening, who is making it happen, when it happens, how it happens, where it happens, why it happens, etc.

Your handout has a list of some things--in no particular order of importance--that we should try to provide for our students, on the assumption that they cannot easily provide them for themselves. Time does not allow us to go through this list item by item, but I will conclude by drawing your attention to item eleven only. If this last item on the list is always provided in your classes, the first ten will almost certainly take care of themselves.

(This is the list that was provided on the handout.)

1. Feedback, correction, encouragement, motivation
2. Many supporting examples of text material
3. Realia, cultural interaction and information
4. Instances and situations in which the language is used
5. The LANGUAGE (as distinct from just its forms)
6. Opportunities for real information exchanges
7. Authentic communication/conversation strategies
8. Alternative pronunciations, vocabulary and structure
9. Supplementary vocabulary and structure
10. Authentic language as used by a native speaker

and above all

11. a warm, supportive, human contact with the language.